New Project at Memorial Garden

The Board of Directors of Memorial Garden has some exciting news to share with you regarding the Yorke Building in the garden. About 3 ½ years ago, we were contacted by an attorney in Wilmington and were told that there was a man who had a deep connection to Memorial Garden and was interested in making a donation that would provide for the renovation and restoration of the Yorke Building. (If you are familiar with the interior of that building, you are aware that it needs to have extensive work done to it.)

This donor is Yorke Lawson, currently a resident of Chapel Hill and the grandson of Jones and Marth Yorke who were longtime members of our church and who were extremely involved in the care and operation of the garden over several decades. Their goal was to preserve it as closely as possible according to the wishes of Sallie Phifer Williamson, a Concord native who single-handedly reclaimed the abandoned grounds of our original cemetery. In 1931, she received permission from our session to restore our original cemetery as a memorial garden in memory of her mother, Adeline Ramseur Phifer. Although she was then living in Chicago, Sallie hired a landscape architect from Charlotte, and the two meticulously created what became Memorial Garden. After Sallie's death in 1939, her only surviving child, Marshall Phifer Williamson, continued the project that had meant so much to his mother. To continue to fulfill her vision, he worked in close collaboration with Jones Yorke until his death in 1966. Marshall Phifer Williamson bequeathed a very generous amount of money to Memorial Garden for its maintenance. Until his death in 1980, Jones Yorke was the "honorary" caretaker who insured that the garden was properly preserved. After his death, his widow Martha assumed her husband's responsibilities until she died in 1992.

In the fall of 2021, Yorke began a conversation with several members of the board and shared his vision to both expand and completely renovate the Jones Yorke Building. Once plans were drawn, the board went before the Historic Preservation Commission and received permission for this construction. It has taken far longer than any of us anticipated to resolve several legal issues and to meet certain requirements imposed by the city. At long last we are now ready to break ground and begin!

We hope you will share our excitement as we watch the beginning of construction of this new space and as we follow its progress until completion. We are so very grateful to Yorke for his incredible generosity and for his continuing interest and involvement in the garden that was so beloved by his grandparents.